

Pablo Picasso returns his “borrowed” Iberian stone heads to the Louvre Museum in Paris from which they had been stolen: he transforms his primitivist style and with Georges Braque begins to develop Analytical Cubism.

During 1907, the year in which the poet-critic Guillaume Apollinaire employed him as a secretary, the young rascal G  ry Pieret would regularly ask Apollinaire’s artist- and writer-friends if they would like anything from the Louvre. They assumed, of course, that he meant the Louvre Department Store. In fact, he meant the Louvre Museum, from which he had taken to stealing various items displayed in undervisited galleries.

It was on his return from one of these pilfering trips that Pieret offered two archaic Iberian stone heads to Picasso, who had discovered this type of sculpture in 1906 in Spain and had used it for his portrait of the American writer Gertrude Stein. Substituting the prismatic physiognomy of its carving—the heavily lidded, staring eyes; the continuous plane that runs the forehead into the bridge of the nose; the parallel ridges that form the mouth—for the sitter’s face, Picasso was convinced that this impassive mask was “truer” to Stein’s likeness than any faithfulness to her actual features could be. He was thus only too happy to acquire these talismanic objects; and “Pieret’s heads” went on to serve as the basis for the features of

• the three left-hand nudes in *Les Femmes d’Alger*.

But in 1911, when Pieret disastrously popped back up in the lives of both Apollinaire and Picasso, primitivism had been left behind in the artist’s development of Cubism, and thus the heads had long since vanished from his pictorial concerns, if not from the back of his cupboard. Picasso’s sudden problem was that at the end of August 1911 Pieret had taken his latest Louvre “acquisition” to the offices of *Paris Journal*, selling the newspaper his story about how easy it was to filch from the museum. Since the Louvre had just suffered, one week earlier, the theft of its most precious object, Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa*, and a dragnet was being set up by the Paris police, Apollinaire panicked, alerted Picasso, and the two of them handed Picasso’s Iberian heads over to the newspaper, which, publishing this turn of events as well, led the authorities to both poet and painter. They were taken in for questioning, Apollinaire being held far longer than Picasso, but were eventually released without charge.

The rise of analysis

The artistic distance that separated Picasso in late 1911 from the primitivism for which the heads had served him earlier was enormous.

The Iberian heads and African masks that Picasso had used as models in 1907 and 1908 had been a means of “distortion,” to use the term of art historian Carl Einstein when, in 1929, he tried to understand the development of Cubism. But this “simplistic” distortion, Einstein wrote, gave way “to a period of analysis and fragmentation and finally to a period of synthesis.” Analysis was also the word applied to the shattering of the surfaces of objects and their amalgamation to the space around them when Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, Picasso’s dealer during Cubism’s development, sat down to write the most serious early account of the movement, *The Rise of Cubism* (1920). And so the term *analytical* got appended to Cubism, and “Analytical Cubism” became the rubric under which to contemplate the transformation Picasso and Georges Braque had achieved in 1911. For by that time, they had swept away the unified perspective of centuries of naturalistic painting and had invented instead a pictorial language that would translate coffee cups and wine bottles, faces and torsos, guitars and pedestal tables into so many tiny, slightly tilted planes.

To look at any work from this “analytical” phase of Cubism, Picasso’s *Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler* of 1910 [1], for instance, or Braque’s *The Portuguese* (*The Emigrant*) from 1911–12 [2], is to observe several consistent characteristics. First, there is a strange contraction of the painters’ palettes, from the full color spectrum to an abstemious monochrome—Braque’s picture is all ochers and umbers like a sepia-toned photograph; Picasso’s, mainly pewter and silver with a few glints of copper. Second, there is an extreme flattening of the visual space as though a roller had pressed all the volume out of the bodies, bursting their contours open in the process so that what little surrounding space remains could flow effortlessly inside their eroded boundaries. Third, there is the visual vocabulary used to describe the physical remains of this explosive process.

This, given its proclivity for the geometrical, supports the “Cubist” appellation. It consists, on the one hand, of shallow planes set more or less parallel to the picture surface, their slight tilt a matter of the patches of light and shade that flicker over the entire field, darkening one edge of a given plane only to illuminate the other but not doing this in any way consistent with a single light source. On the other, it establishes a linear network that

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scores the entire surface with an intermittent grid: at certain points, identifiable as the edges of described objects—Kahnweiler's jacket lapels or his jawline, for instance, or the Portuguese sitter's sleeve or the neck of his guitar; at others, the edges of planes that, scaffoldlike, seem merely to be structuring the space; and at still others, a vertical or horizontal trace that attaches to nothing at all but continues the grid's repetitive network. Finally, there are the small grace-notes of naturalistic details, such as the single arc of Kahnweiler's mustache or the double one of his watch-chain.

Given the exceedingly slight information we can gain from this about either the figures or their settings, the explanations that grew up around Picasso's and Braque's Cubism at this time are extremely curious. For whether it was Apollinaire in his essays collected as *The Cubist Painters* (1913), or the artists Albert Gleizes (1881–1953) and Jean Metzinger (1883–1956) in their book *On Cubism* (1912), or any of the critics and poets gathered around the movement, such as André Salmon (1881–1969) or Maurice Raynal (1884–1954), all the writers attempted to justify this swerve away from realism by arguing that what was being delivered to the viewer was *more* not less knowledge of the depicted object. Stating that natural vision is impoverished since we can never see the whole of a three-dimensional object from any single vantage point—the most we see of a cube, for example, is three of its faces—they argued that Cubism overcomes this handicap by breaking with a single perspective to show the sides and back simultaneously with the front, so that we apprehend the thing from everywhere, grasping it conceptually as a composite of the views we would have if we actually moved around it. Positing the superiority of conceptual knowledge over merely perceptual realism, these writers inevitably gravitated toward the language of science, describing the break with perspective as a move toward non-Euclidean geometry, or the simultaneity of distinct spatial positions as a function of the fourth dimension.

The laws of painting as such

Kahnweiler, who had exhibited the 1908 Braque landscapes that gave Cubism its name (the journalist-critic Louis Vauxcelles wrote that Braque had reduced “everything to geometric schemas, to cubes”), and who had been active as Picasso's dealer since 1909, had a very different argument to make about the inner workings of Cubism, one far easier to reconcile with how the paintings actually look. Cut off by the outbreak of World War I from his Paris gallery and the pictorial movement he had followed so closely, Kahnweiler used his time in Switzerland to reflect on the meaning of Cubism, composing his explanation in 1915–16.

Arguing that Cubism was exclusively concerned with bringing about the unity of the pictorial object, *The Rise of Cubism* defines this unity as the necessary fusion of two seemingly irreconcilable opposites: the depicted volumes of “real” objects and the flatness of the painter's own physical object (just as “real” as anything in the world before the artist), which is the canvas plane of the picture. Reasoning that the pictorial tool to represent volume had always



Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918)

Born the illegitimate son of a member of the lesser Polish nobility, Guillaume Albert Apollinaire de Kostrowitzky grew up on the French Riviera among the cosmopolitan *demi-monde*. At seventeen, deeply affected by the poets Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé, he composed a handwritten anarcho-symbolist “newspaper” filled with his own poems and articles. Apollinaire soon became an active figure in a Parisian avant-garde that included Alfred Jarry and André Salmon, and he met Picasso in 1903. Together with Salmon and Max Jacob, he formed the group known as the *bande à Picasso* (the Picasso gang). Having started to write art criticism in 1905, he steadily campaigned for advanced painting, publishing *The Cubist Painters* in 1913, the same year in which he published the major collection of his poems *Alcools*. At the outbreak of World War I, Apollinaire enlisted in the French Army and was sent to the front in early 1915. From there, he mailed a stream of postcards to his friends containing his notes and *calligrammes*, the typographically experimental poems he published in 1918.

Hit by shrapnel in the trenches in early 1916, Apollinaire was trepanned and returned to Paris. In 1917, he delivered the lecture “L'esprit nouveau et les poètes,” and in 1918 he staged the play *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, both of them anticipating the aesthetics of Surrealism. Weakened by his wounds, he succumbed to an influenza epidemic that swept Paris in November 1918.

been the shading that brings forms into illusionistic relief, and that shading was a matter of the gray- or tonal-scale alone, Kahnweiler saw the logic of banishing color from the Cubist “analysis” and of solving the problem in part by using the shading tool against its own grain: creating the lowest possible relief so that depicted volume would be far more reconcilable with the flat surface. Further, he explained the logic of piercing the envelopes of closed volumes in order to override the gaps opened up between the edges of objects and thus to be able to declare the unbroken continuity of the canvas plane. If he ended by declaring that “this new language has given painting an unprecedented freedom,” this was not as an argument about conceptual mastery over the world's empirical data—as in Apollinaire's notion of Cubism keeping up with



1 • Pablo Picasso, *Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler*, Fall-Winter 1910
Oil on canvas, 100.6 x 72.8 (39 1/2 x 28 5/8)

modern science—but one of securing the autonomy and internal logic of the picture object.

This explanation, dismissing extra-pictorial motivations for Cubism, accorded with the understanding of those who used the new style, as Piet Mondrian would, as the basis for developing a purely abstract art. Not that Mondrian was disengaged from the world of modernity, such as developments in science and industry, but he believed that for a painter to be modern he needed first and foremost to understand the logic of his own domain and to make this understanding evident in his work. Such a theory would later emerge as the doctrine of “modernism” (as opposed to modernity) • that the American critic Clement Greenberg would enunciate in the early sixties by arguing that modernist painting had adopted the approach of scientific rationalism and of Enlightenment logic by limiting its practice to the area of “its own competence” and thus—exhibiting “what was unique and irreducible in each particular art”—to demonstrating the laws of painting rather than those of nature.

It is not surprising, then, that Greenberg’s discussion of how Cubism developed would reinforce Kahnweiler’s. Tracing an unbroken progression toward the compression of pictorial space, beginning with *Les Femmes d’Alger* and ending with the 1912 invention of collage, Greenberg saw Analytical Cubism as the increasing fusion of two types of flatness: the “depicted flatness” by which the tilted planes shoved the fragmented objects closer and closer to the surface; and the “literal flatness” of that surface itself. If by 1911 in a picture such as Braque’s *The Portuguese* [2], Greenberg said, these two types of flatness threatened to have become indistinguishable, so that the grid would seem to be articulating only one surface and one flatness, the Cubists responded by adding illusionistic devices, only now ones that would “undecieve the eye,” rather than, as in traditional practice, continuing to fool it. Such devices consisted of things like a depicted “nail” seeming to pierce the top of a canvas so as fictively to cast its shadow onto the surface “beneath” it; or they are to be found in the stenciled lettering of *The Portuguese*, which, by demonstrably sitting on top of the canvas surface (the result of the letters’ semimechanical application), pushes the little patches of shading and the barely tilted geometric shapes back into the field of depicted relief just “below” that surface.

A mountain to climb

In pointing to the fact that Braque adopted these devices earlier than Picasso—not only the stenciled lettering and the nails illusionistically tacking the whole canvas to the studio wall but also the wood-graining patterns employed by house painters—Greenberg set up an internal competition between the two artists, thereby rupturing their “cordée,” or self-proclaimed posture of having been roped together like mountaineers as they explored their new pictorial terrain (their collaboration was so shared that they often did not sign their own paintings). This vision of a race toward flatness was further enhanced by the question of which of the two first



2 • Georges Braque, *The Portuguese (The Emigrant)*, Fall 1911–early 1912
Oil on canvas, 114.6 x 81.6 (45 1/4 x 32 1/4)

internalized the lessons of late Cézanne by adopting the practice of visual slippage between adjacent elements (called *passage*, in French) that was an early version of the Cubist piercing of the spatial envelopes of objects.

Yet as our eyes become increasingly accustomed to this group of paintings, we realize that the works of the two men are consistently differentiated by the greater concern for transparency in Braque’s and the denser, more tactile quality of Picasso’s—something underscored by the latter’s interest in exploring the possibilities of Cubism for sculpture. This compressed sense of density, this interest in the experience of touch, made art historian Leo Steinberg protest against the merging of the two artists’ concerns and thus the blurring of our vision of individual pictures.

Indeed, Picasso’s overwhelming concern with a vestigial kind of depth—manifested most dramatically in the landscapes he painted in Spain at Horta de Ebro in 1909 [3]—makes the whole schema of Cubism’s development by a progressive flattening of pictorial space seem peculiarly incomplete. For in these works, where we seem to be looking upward—houses ascending a hill toward the top of a mountain, for example, their splayed-apart roof and wall planes



5 • Pablo Picasso, *Still Life with Chair Caning*, 1912

Oil and pasted oilcloth on canvas, surrounded with rope, 27 x 34.9 (10 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 13 $\frac{3}{4}$)

And nowhere is this disjunction between the visual and the tactile as absolute *and* as economically stated than in the *Still Life with Chair Caning* [5] that Picasso painted in the spring of 1912, near the very end of Analytical Cubism. Affixing a length of rope around the edge of an oval canvas, Picasso creates a little still life that appears both to be set within the carved frame of a normal painting, and thus arranged in relation to the vertical field of our plane of vision, and to be laid out on the surface of an oval table, the carved edge of which is presented by the same rope and the covering for which is given literally by a glued-on section of printed oilcloth. Like the downward plunge at Horta, the table-top view is presented as one alternative here, a horizontal in direct opposition to the “diaphane’s” vertical, a bodily perspective declaring the tactile as separate from the visual.

Braque’s commitment to transparency declares his fidelity to the visuality of the visual arts, his obedience to the tradition of painting-as-diaphane. His *Homage to J. S. Bach* (1911–12) places a violin (signaled by the telltale “f”-holes and the scroll of its neck)

on a table behind a music-stand holding the score titled “J. S. BACH” (a slant rhyme on Braque’s name). Because of the patchy shading, each object reads clearly behind the other and the still life falls before our eyes like a lacy curtain.

FURTHER READING

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- Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler**, *The Rise of Cubism*, trans. Henry Aronson (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1949)
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- Christine Poggi**, *In Defiance of Painting* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992)
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- Leo Steinberg**, “Resisting Cézanne: Picasso’s *Three Women*,” *Art in America*, vol. 66, no. 6, November–December 1978